

"The most terrible consequence of monoculture is how it camouflages itself in a false landscape"

Esther Peñas

El vasto territorio (Caja negra), winner of the Santiago Municipal Prize for Literature in 2022, is a novel that denounces the effects and implications of deforestation, the consequences of environmental destruction in a specific area of the planet (Chile) and how these ravages lead to a deterioration of affection and life in common. Interwoven with the subject of the narration, its plot, and how it is told, with a series of footnotes that build up an unfolding of the main plot growing with the ductility of mushrooms, crossed by a sovereign lyricism that gives way to police, horror, scientific tones... We talked with its author, Simón López Trujillo (Santiago, 1994).



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Before going into detail with the appearance of the fungus, how does the industrial deforestation that marks your life affect the inhabitants of these places you describe?

The novel is set in Curanilahue (a commune in southern Chile, near Concepción) for several reasons. First, because that place, which today has more than ninety percent of its surface covered with pine and eucalyptus trees, is an example of how large forestry companies affect the territories where they are inserted, producing environmental devastation and impoverishment of the area. But also because these large companies make even their own workers precarious, often normalising labor deregulation and anti-union practices. In fact, the novel is dedicated to Rodrigo Cisterna for that reason. He was a forestry worker and union leader killed by police officers on May 3, 2007, in the

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context of a takeover of the Horcones plant, on the outskirts of Curanilahue, in which the workers were demanding minimum conditions for their employment: an end to subcontracting, wage readjustment, among other basic issues. I was interested in setting the

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novel there because it is a territory where different layers of violence are mixed, which are things that the novel explores through its characters.

In your opinion, what is the worst consequence of monocultures?

The monoculture forestry industry has many harmful consequences for the environment and society. On the one hand, there is the impact on the environment, expressed in problems of water, biodiversity, bee mortality and human illnesses caused by pesticides, as well as a notable increase in the frequency and size of mega wildfires, such as those we experienced in February of this year in the same area where the novel is set. On the other hand, most of these large companies have been set up in territories belonging to the Mapuche people-nation, which has aggravated the conflict in regions such as Araucanía and Bío Bío. It is for reasons such as these that various scholars have mentioned the need for a reform of the current Chilean forestry model, installed since the Pinochet dictatorship, where large forestry companies were supported by legislation such as Decree Law 701, which subsidised up to 85% of the plantation of pine and eucalyptus monoculture plantations. This has generated a form of production that today is in deep crisis, whose proposals for reform can be seen in texts such as "Chile necesita un nuevo modelo forestal", edited by forestry engineers Luis Astorga Schneider and Heinrich Burschel, and published in Chile by LOM in 2019. In any case, the most terrible consequence of monoculture, I think, is the way it is camouflaged as if it were a landscape. After all, people get used to living surrounded by forests that are not forests. Naturalising that landscape that stretches thousands of kilometres to the south and that, in those rows and rows of identical trees, prevents us from seeing the multiple acts of violence that have made it possible to put them there. And there is an enormous danger of their presence because a spark is enough to set everything on fire.

To what extent could nature be conjured up to threaten human existence?

In the novel, I was interested in exploring the fungi kingdom not so much as a mere threat to the human species but as a metaphor for the interconnectedness that makes life on Earth possible. One of the peculiarities of fungi is that they are deeply collaborative organisms. Every forest has trees with roots attached to fungal mycelia. This, called mycorrhizal unions, also works for me as a metaphor for how literature works. No text is written in a vacuum, and I am not interested in the romantic approach to writing as a genius who is inspired separately by other voices and writings. Originality only interests me as a productive dialogue with a certain tradition. Besides, one always writes from a body, permanently affected by other voices, sonorities, ideas and words, and writing is nothing more than a way of channelling all that. From Baruch Spinoza to Juan Rulfo, diverse narrative textures nourish this novel.

In this way, I believe that three years after the novel's publication, it is difficult for me as a reader to find a central organising nucleus for everything. Different textualities construct different visions of nature, thought and the need to be part of something bigger (this idea of "the vast"). I believe that having been inspired, in a rather heretical way, by Spinoza's notion of nature (which is also God) helped me to conceive this form of writing as well. A nature understood in this way threatens not so much humanity as the humanist idea that we are a reason separated from its body. And a body separated from others, sanitised, and aseptic. Fungi interested me because of their omnipresence. They are everywhere; it is enough to leave a fruit out of the fridge. And this invisible latency seemed significant to me when thinking about another idea of the relationship between bodies and species.

Which is more susceptible to amendment, corruption or the climate emergency?

I wouldn't know.

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Does the terrifying drift of the narrative reflect your pessimism about the planet's future?

As James Baldwin would say, "to be a pessimist is to think that human life is a mere academic matter". In that sense, I am not a pessimist at all, and I don't think this novel is approached in that way, either. The footnotes form a subterranean fabric, more omniscient than the main narrative, in which one senses a possibility of a future after the catastrophe. It is not a utopia but a way of showing that life, both human and of other species, possesses an enormous capacity for adaptation, even when nature itself is coming down on us. In this sense, I am interested in disputing the idea of the end of the world that has become commonplace in recent years. Given climate change and other issues, the apocalypse finally seems to become a "universal" issue. That is, since it is now of direct concern to Europe and the United States, it is therefore globalised. But wasn't the genocide of indigenous populations in Latin America during colonisation the end of the world? Isn't the bombing and occupation of Gaza an apocalypse unfolding before our eyes? There is a coloniality present in how we understand the climate threat today that, if taken naively, can lead to a defence of nature in the abstract that I am not interested in. It is not a question of opposing nature and society (for that, as Jason Moore would say, is the environmentalism of the rich countries), but of seeing how to establish more sustainable relations with the environment without this implying that the only way to defend nature is to remove all human presence from it.

Moreover, it is not humanity as a whole responsible for this crisis; it is a series of companies and millionaires with first and last names. This book's writing was inspired by a history of peasant and workers' struggles that seem to have almost completely disappeared from the collective memory in Chile. I am thinking of projects like the Panguipulli Forestry and Timber Complex (COFOMAP), which, during the government of Salvador Allende, was a vast forestry company controlled by its workers and which, moreover, had a mode of production that was much more environmentally sustainable and dignified for its workers than the current model of large forestry companies like Arauco and CMPC. But after the 1973 coup d'état, COFOMAP was dismantled at the point of massacres and disappearances. That history was buried in a past that today can only be remembered in a utopian way.

*The contributions of the scientist Giovanna on *Cryptococcus gattii* are crucial. To what extent can science be an ally in the fight against climate change?*

Several years ago, watching a documentary on the fungi kingdom, I learned about the fungus *Cryptococcus gattii*, which in the late 1990s caused an infectious outbreak on Vancouver Island, Canada, where several people and animals died. The curious thing, they said, is that this pathogenic fungus is endemic to eucalyptus. The question then arose: couldn't this happen in Chile, where monoculture forestry covers more than three million hectares, dominated by radiata pine and eucalyptus? That's where the idea appeared, and the novel's writing ended up working as the means to explore it. I have always been struck by the notion of writing as a kind of virus, as the

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Chilean poet Gonzalo Millán used to say. Something that infects a body and uses it to reproduce itself according to its laws. The fungi worked in that way too: a kingdom of tremendous intelligence, which expands and sustains life underneath, without us noticing it, except when its fruiting bodies (the callampas) emerge, which are precisely its means of reproduction.

On the other hand, I was interested in the novel, which shows that nature depends on the class from which it is viewed, and the character of Giovanna is fundamental in this sense. It happens to me that, at times, discourses such as the Anthropocene remain in a kind of metaphysical environmentalism, where an abstract, global nature is defended, purified of human presence and history. The bucolic, touristy southern landscape that Giovanna studies

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is not the same as the one inhabited by Patricio and Catalina or that of the peasant cooperatives that cross Pedro's dreams. There, extractivist violence is expressed in a tremendously real way, linked to particular experiences and memories. I wanted to question these ways of defending nature from a purely conservationist point of view and, at the same time, to show how science can be an ally, in many cases, of the very companies dedicated to devastating it. In this sense, I am interested in thinking about how the landscape can become an accomplice. How, over the years, nature is capable of erasing the deaths that have passed through it. For example, the territory in 1971 and 1973 was the Panguipulli Forestry and Timber Complex; today, it is a private national park owned by a single businessman and aimed mainly at foreign tourists. In this, I am very inspired by the narrative work of Guadalupe Santa Cruz, whose work puts in conflict the relationship between territory, memory and the capacity of our symbolic imaginary to see through these layers of sedimented violence. Something similar to what Cristina Rivera Garza has done, in *Autobiografía del algodón*, for example, or the excellent documentary *Las cruces* by Teresa

Arredondo and Carlos Vásquez, about the massacre in September 1973 of 19 workers of CMPC, a huge paper mill in Laja, who were handed over by the same company to the town's carabineros for being considered "subversive elements".

How is it possible that no one can put an end to the outrages endured by the indigenous population, some of which you reflect in this 'artefact' (it is something different from a novel, in my opinion)?

I think it's interesting to think of this book as an artefact, although it's unclear to me in what sense you mean it. In any case, it is very naïve to think that the multiple forms of violence experienced by indigenous peoples in Chile and Latin America could be resolved by "someone". This is a very complex issue with a historical trajectory of centuries and one that has shown itself to require a much deeper debate within Chilean society. Especially today, with the advance of the ultra-right in the region, there has been a resurgence of racist discourses and others that criticise so-called "identity politics" from an extreme individualism, incapable of seeing the expansion of rights to historically marginalised minorities as anything other than a deprivation of their own freedoms or social guarantees. This is the basis for rhetoric such as that of Milei in Argentina, which does not understand the individual as a social being but as an entity determined entirely by his or her capacity to consume. Under this view (which is a tremendously precarious and unhinged form of liberalism, even within the liberal world), everything is tradable, and, therefore, the state and its rights are conceived only as impediments to the action and self-determination of the market. Of course, there is a need for self-criticism from the left as to how much we have really done when it comes to agreeing and elaborating policies and discourses that manage to summon a popular mass capable of confronting discourses like these, or, in Chile, in terms of understanding the complexity that the actual application of concepts like "plurinationality" would imply in a society as historically conservative and racist as Chile's (something that blew up in our faces with the referendum on the last constituent process). However, it is also necessary to understand that finding a quick and definitive solution to these problems is difficult. In this sense, the process of writing this book was also a way of studying the complicity between the Chilean state and the large forestry companies installed in territories that belonged to the Mapuche people and to various peasant movements, something that occurred during the dictatorship, but which was deepened during the governments of the transition to democracy. This research allowed me not to find a way out or a solution but rather, more humbly, to learn more about the problem and understand what we are talking about. Regarding the Indigenous issue in particular, fortunately, today, there are a number of intellectuals, poets and Indigenous writers, particularly Mapuche, who are

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writing about these and other issues. I am thinking of intellectuals such as Enrique Antileo and Claudio Alvarado Lincopi and poets and writers such as Daniela Catrileo, Roxana Miranda Rupailaf and Jaime Luis Huenún, whose works I greatly admire, both for their formal and purely literary work and for their ability to think about contemporary Indigenous memory and identity, as well as to denounce the historical and present-day violence experienced by the Mapuche people.

How do working relationships influence emotional relationships? Does adversity (at work, in health, in the environment) make the community stronger or weaker?

At some point in the writing of the novel, I wondered whether, in the second chapter, the fungus infection would be narrated as something generalised, brought into the realm of a science fiction novel. But then we were hit by the covid-19 pandemic, and I realised that narrating something on such a scale forces one to lose the particular vision and familiar affections that had developed up to that point. That is why the catastrophe is not narrated in the novel itself, but only hinted at in the footnotes. And from the middle of the first chapter onwards, the focus is on how, in the face of devastation and tragedy, there is a reorganisation of affection and care between Patricio and Catalina. I wanted to explore the potency of the tenderness that emerges there. Something that is a form of resistance in the face of the various forms of violence that cross their lives, material, symbolic and spiritual violence. I believe that, in adverse moments, community is put to the test. It emerges as a necessity.

The pandemic taught us that: we are social beings and we need others to live. And I think the novel explores diverse community experiences, in different territories and classes: the community of scientists that Giovanna coordinates, the peasant cooperatives in Pedro's dreams, the religious community that Baltasar leads, the family restructuring of Patricio and Catalina. Several of these forms have to do with ways of survival, at a certain point, in times when working and spiritual life are often in deep crisis. In fact, mushrooms, as a metaphor and as a kingdom, serve to think about other ways of understanding the community between species. One of the books that I found most useful for this was *The Mushrooms at the End of the World*, by anthropologist Anna Tsing Lowenhaupt, in which, based on the study of various communities that gather the matsutake mushroom, she proposes ways of survival in what she calls "the ruins of capitalism". Personally, I am not interested in writing without some sense of community on the horizon. Not just thinking about readers, but even before that, in terms of how writing a certain book allows me to read certain others in a different way. This novel, for example, was a way of revisiting some Chilean authors who mixed social realism with a modernist and tremendously imaginative formal work, such as Manuel Rojas, Marta Brunet, Carlos Droguett and Juan Emar, and the writing was a kind of inner dialogue, very fruitful, with their proposals. A kind of homage, of course. But also a way of understanding literature not as a canon but as a kind of constellation of young and old, living and dead, with whom one meets to talk. This is a precious idea that Ben Lerner once told me, who inherited it from his teachers Rosmarie Waldrop and Keith Waldrop, two poets of the U.S. avant-garde who are of fundamental importance to me as well. Precisely because their works inscribe in them all his readings and conversations. This kind of contagion is what interests me. Writing with and from others. Not the anguish of influence, but the pleasure of letting oneself be carried away by voices that expand what one believes oneself to be.

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